

## VICTIMIZATION, CITIZEN FEAR, AND ATTITUDES TOWARD POLICE

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### ABSTRACT

Respondents from 1200 randomly selected households in Colorado reported via telephone on victimization, fear of crime, and attitudes toward police. Women, older respondents, and whites expressed more favorable attitudes toward police than men, younger respondents, and non-whites. Fear of being hurt during victimization for a personal crime moderated the relation between the seriousness of victimization and attitudes toward police. We discuss these results within a community policing perspective.

### INTRODUCTION

Community-oriented policing (Goldstein 1990) has replaced traditional, arrest-oriented strategies in which police treated only the *symptoms* and not the causes of disorder. This change is similar to the one that has occurred in medicine. Doctors no longer treat just the symptoms of disease, but now they work in partnership with patients to promote healthy lifestyles, a primary condition of wellness.

According to Stevens,

Community policing is a preventive approach through an empowered problem-solving partnership of police and community to control crime, reduce fear of crime and enhance lifestyle experiences of all community constituents. (2003 13)

This approach places a large responsibility on police to foster community involvement and to solve problems defined by citizens. The emphasis is on maintaining social order, a state of certainty and stability in social life (Wilson & Kelling 1982). Community policing also places a great burden on citizens to help police to maintain order and to control crime. In this partnership, evaluation of the police by citizens is a primary measure of police performance, and fear of crime is a key feature of citizens' attitudes toward police. This situation is complicated by the fact that citizen fear and attitudes toward police are not fully connected to the actual rate of crime (Brady 1995; Hoover 1996; Wilson & Kelling 1982). As Stevens pointed out, it is not that "police make an arrest, it is how they do it that counts" (Stevens 2003 17).

Ideally, community policing should decrease fear of crime and the crime rate, but it has not always done so. For instance, in Boston, violent crime was lower than it had been in ten years, but citizens were extremely fear-

ful of becoming victims (Stevens 2003 249).

On a resource-allocation level, community policing is complicated by the sometimes conflicting goals of decreasing the crime rate and solving small problems before they escalate into larger ones. For instance, crime rates will appear to increase when police encourage greater citizen-police interaction because citizens are more likely to report crimes to them. Furthermore, disorder can make citizens fearful, even if it does not raise the crime rate (Stevens 2003 25; Wilson & Kelling 1982). Increased police presence can be an indication of disorder, so citizens may feel more fearful of crime, as in the example of Boston (Kelling & Coles 1996; Moore & Trojanowicz 2000). That is to say, when individuals define a situation as real, it becomes real in its consequences (Thomas & Znaniecki 1958). Overall, the United States has experienced a decreasing crime rate but increasing citizen fear (Stevens 2001 155). As Moore and Trojanowicz (2000) pointed out, a moderate level of fear can be productive if it causes citizens to take precautions against victimization, but higher levels of fear can restrict freedom.

Goffman (1971) argued that when one is fearful, feelings of *adaptive competency* break down and a zone of vulnerability expands. One cannot ignore people within this zone. Alarm results from a disruption between *designed* events (where others mean one harm, but try to act normally) and *unconnected* events (where others do not mean one harm; Goffman 1971 329; see also Warr 1990).

Since community policing focuses on solving problems *as defined by citizens*, police are placing an emphasis on making people feel safe. This process may result in a focus on public order, code violations, and misdemeanors. Therefore, citizens may become less fearful about crime in their communi-

ties, and their views of police may become more positive, but the actual rate of serious crimes could remain unaffected (Kramer & McElderry 1994; Moore & Trojanowicz 2000; Stevens 2003 15).

### Surveys of Victims

Victim surveys have been used to gauge the seriousness and rate of crime that is not reported to police. The National Crime Victimization Survey [NCVS] (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2004) provides national estimates of crime rates. Beginning in 1993 the Census Bureau reintroduced a victimization survey of 12 large cities that gathers information on fear of crime and satisfaction with police (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2003; Smith, Steadman, Minton & Townsend 1999). Together, these surveys allow the estimation of true rates of crime—not just reported crime.

Interestingly, when differences between rates of reported crime (as measured by Uniform Crime Reports) and rates measured from victim surveys (NCVS) were controlled, the findings were highly consistent (Biderman & Lynch 1991). Unfortunately, neither of the two victimization surveys provides data for a small city or county because it will not be among the 12 Census Bureau cities, and it will be too small to provide an adequate number of cases from the NCVS sample. While we do not have a particular reason to expect great differences between our city and those in the other surveys, the possibility of differences seem to warrant surveys of smaller localities.

### Reportage

Overall, 39 percent of all crimes discovered through the NCVS were reported to the police in 2000 (Hart & Rennison 2003 1). The reporting rates ranged from a high of 92 percent for completed motor vehicle thefts to a low of 29 percent for other thefts. Overall, 49 percent of violent personal crimes and 36 percent of personal crimes were reported to police (Hart & Rennison 2003 2).

The following factors have been shown to increase victim reporting and formal response by the police: seriousness of the crime, the extent of loss or injury, lack of prior relationship between victim and offender (i.e., the incident was not merely a personal misunderstanding), the likelihood that police action will be effective, and the extent to which police action would be appropriate (Walker

1994; Black 1989; Vera Institute of Justice 1981). Overall, from 1992 to 2000 the rates at which victims reported incidents to the police have increased steadily (Hart & Rennison 2003 3).

### Attitudes toward Police

Race, gender, class and age are important predictors of attitudes toward the police (Baker, Nienstedt, Everett & McCleary 1983; Smith et al 1999). Negative perceptions of the police have been most pronounced among young African-Americans (Huang & Vaughn 1996; Parker 1995). Generally, women have held more favorable attitudes toward police, but in several studies, gender differences have not reached statistical significance (Baker et al 1983; Huang & Vaughn 1996).

Smith et al (1999) analyzed victimization surveys for 12 U.S. cities. Results revealed that satisfaction with local police varied by race of the respondent, fear of victimization, and whether or not the respondent had been a victim of a crime. Among white respondents, 90 percent were satisfied with the local police. Among Latino respondents, 77 percent were satisfied, and among African American respondents, 76 percent were satisfied with police.

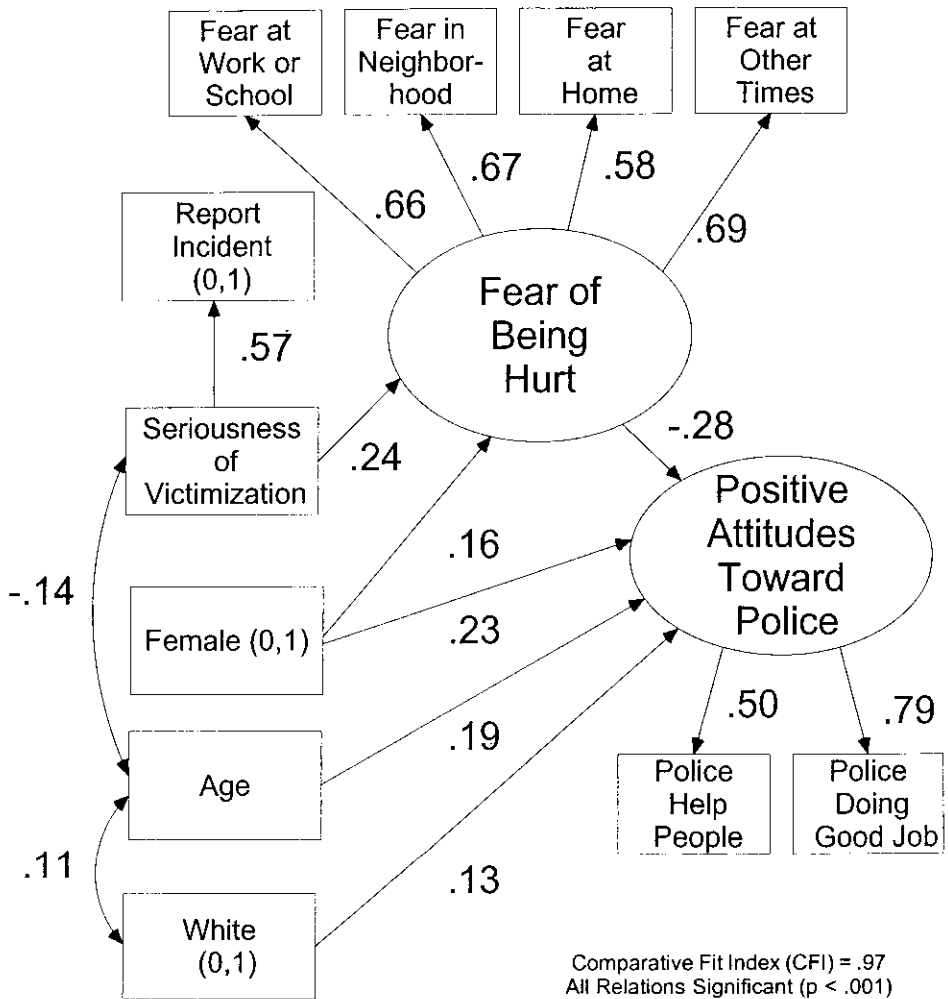
Similarly, 89 percent of respondents who indicated they were not fearful of crime in their neighborhood expressed satisfaction with police compared to 79 percent of respondents who were fearful. A total of 86 percent of respondents who had not been a victim of crime indicated satisfaction with police compared to 69 percent who had been victimized (Smith et al 1999).

### Perceived Risk

Using a national sample of 1101 cases, Ferraro (1995) attempted to predict fear of crime. Perception of risk of becoming a victim was the most important predictor of fear. Responses to fear can include avoidance of dangerous situations (*constrained behavior*), or *defensive behaviors* such as installing extra locks, engraving ID numbers on possessions, getting a dog, or carrying a weapon (Ferraro 1995 55; Moore & Trojanowicz 2000). A response to fear also can be less positive attitudes toward police.

Fear is connected to an individual's *definition of the situation* (Thomas & Znaniecki 1958), that is, how a victim interprets the pos-

Figure 1. Structural Equations Model of Positive Attitudes Toward Police



sibility of a future victimization. In this complex process, the individual takes into account objective circumstances of her situation as well as her subjective reactions to it. In this process, actors "determine the vague," because they can not know the true risks of future victimization (Ferraro 1995 11). Estimates of risk emerge in interactions with others, and various definitions of the situation may compete for acceptance. Fear is part of a process of imaginative rehearsal (Mead 1934). To the extent that a real victimization has occurred, the imaginative rehearsal becomes more vivid.

In Ferraro's model, the relation between "Fear of Crime" and demographic variables was mediated by "Perceived Risk of Victimization". Younger people perceived more risks than older people did. This finding was new, and it held as either a linear or a non-linear effect (Ferraro 1995 62). A consistent finding was that women perceived more risks than men did. Further analyses showed that this difference in genders was due to women being afraid that any crime could become a sexual crime (Ferraro 1995 100). In addition, members of ethnic minority groups perceived more risk than whites did (Ferraro 1995 62).

### **Theoretical Model**

Our research is consistent with Ferraro's Risk Interpretation Model, but unfortunately, we could not test risk interpretation because we did not measure perceived risks. Our model used perceived risks as a rationale for predicted relations between independent variables of gender, age, and minority status, and seriousness of victimization, on one hand, and fear of being hurt on the other hand (see Figure 1).

We used our model to predict "Attitudes toward the Police". We investigated "Fear of Being Hurt" as a possible mediating variable that interpreted the relations between demographic variables of gender, age, and minority status and "Attitudes toward Police". We also investigated "Fear of Being Hurt" as a mediating variable that interpreted the relation between "Seriousness of Victimization" and "Attitudes toward Police".

### **METHOD**

Survey Sampling (SSI) of Fairfield, Connecticut drew the sample. Within the area code for El Paso County, Colorado, SSI selected exchanges and working blocks of 100 contiguous numbers. SSI used a random start to select exchanges and working blocks of telephone numbers. Within each selected block, SSI randomly selected the final two digits of the telephone number. SSI verified the eligibility of the telephone number by checking it against a database of businesses. If SSI found the number to be ineligible, they systematically and sequentially checked possible replacement numbers; and they selected the first eligible number for the block.

### **Interviewing Procedures**

Interviewers from Voter/Consumer Research (V/CR) of Houston, Texas conducted twelve-hundred interviews. Interviewers made four attempts to contact respondents. They completed 644 interviews on the first attempt (54%). They completed 304 interviews (25%) on the second attempt, and they completed 164 interviews (14%) on the third attempt. They completed 43 interviews (3%) on the fourth attempt. In addition, interviewers completed 45 interviews (4%) during scheduled callbacks.

Interviewers used a screening method to insure that younger respondents were adequately represented in the sample. The in-

terviewer asked for the youngest man in the household who was over eighteen years of age. If the person was not available, the interviewer asked for the youngest woman over eighteen years of age. After screening, the interviewer promised confidentiality to the respondent and obtained informed consent.

### **Respondents**

Interviewers contacted one respondent over eighteen years via telephone from a random sample of 1200 households in El Paso County, Colorado. The respondent reported on three important issues: victimization for the household during the previous six months, fear of being hurt in a personal crime, and attitudes toward police.

Fifty-one percent of respondents were men and forty-nine percent were women. The median age of respondents was 39 years. Of the respondents, 80 percent were white. Census figures show the county as 80 percent white. Percentages of respondents in other racial and ethnic groups also closely matched census figures for the county. Census figures are shown in parentheses. Five percent of respondents were African-American (7.7%), 7.5 percent were Hispanic/Latino (8.4%), 2 percent were Asian (2.9%) and .4 percent were Native American (.9%). In addition, 4.9 percent of the respondents classified themselves as other and .2 percent refused to answer. Census data do not contain information on these latter two categories, but if the respondents in them are considered to be non-white, the sample and census percentages match almost exactly.

### **Instrument**

The interview began with screening items from NCVS-1 (National Crime Victimization Survey, Bureau of Justice Statistics 1993). If no victimization had taken place during the previous six months, interviewers gathered information on attitudes toward law enforcement and demographics. If a respondent's answers to the NCVS-1 instrument determined that victimization had taken place, interviewers gathered information for the first occurrence of each type of crime using NCVS-2 (Incident Report). If a respondent wished to report a previously unreported crime or sought counseling, interviewers referred the respondent to police or to a counselor.

To measure attitudes regarding crime, interviewers asked respondents a root ques-

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Measured Variables (n=1026)

Item	Mean	S.D.
<b>Fear of Being Hurt</b>		
How often do you feel someone might try to harm you:		
at work or school?	1.79	1.44
in your neighborhood?	1.51	.78
at home?	1.30	.62
at other times?	1.69	.81
<b>Positive Attitudes Toward Police</b>		
How good a job is being done by your local law enforcement agency?	3.08	.76
Law enforcement officers would rather catch you doing something wrong than try to help you.	2.32	1.28
<b>Seriousness of Victimization</b>		
	.48	.62
<b>Report Incident to Police (0,1)</b>		
	.22	.51

tion, "How often do you feel that someone might try to physically harm you?" Specific items said, "At work or school," "In my neighborhood," "At home," and "At other times." Interviewers recorded answers on a five-point response scale of "Never" (1), "Rarely" (2), "Some days" (3), "Most days" (4), and "Every day" (5). Interviewers asked, "In general, how good a job is being done by your local law enforcement agency?" They recorded responses on a four-point response scale, "An excellent job" (4), "A good job" (3), "An average job" (2), "A poor job" (1). A Likert-type item said, "Law enforcement officers would rather catch you doing something wrong than try to help you." Interviewers used a five-point, Likert-type response scale of Strongly Disagree (1), Disagree (2), Neutral (3), Agree (4), and Strongly Agree (5).

We coded a variable of Seriousness of Victimization for each occurrence. This scale ranged from zero for no victimization to four for a serious victimization. If the respondent reported that something was stolen worth less than \$150, or they reported a burglary in which nothing was taken, we coded it as "one." If the respondent reported that something was stolen or vandalized in which the loss was more than \$150, or if the respondent reported a burglary in which something was taken, we coded it as "two." If a respondent reported that someone in the household was attacked without a weapon but not hurt, we coded it as "three." Finally, if the respondent reported that someone in the household was attacked without a weapon and hurt, or if someone in the household was attacked with a weapon, we coded it as "four."

For each incident, interviewers asked the

respondent if the crime was reported to police. We coded this item one for a reported incident and zero for an unreported one. Analyses used listwise deletion of missing data, so if information was missing on any item, the entire case was omitted from further consideration. An answer of "don't know" was counted as missing. Analyses were based on 1026 cases.

## RESULTS

Comparison of national and local rates of victimization and rates of reporting crime to police are important considerations in judging the extent to which findings from local analyses can be generalized to other populations. Local rates of victimization for theft were about half of the national rate, and for burglary the local rate was about one-third of the national one. The local rate of sexual assault was about equal to the national rate. By contrast, the local rates for motor vehicle theft and assault were more than twice the national rates, and the local rate for assault with a weapon exceeded the national rate by a factor of almost four.

Local rates of reporting crime fell within national confidence intervals, so we regarded them as similar to the national rates. The only exception to these results was that local residents were more likely to report theft than victims nationwide were.

### Fear of Victimization

Means on Table 1 showed that when respondents told interviewers how often they felt that someone might try to harm them at work or school, the average response (Mean = 1.79) fell between "never" (1) and "rarely"

(2) on the response scale. Similar mean scores were reported by respondents for fear of harm in their neighborhood, at home, and at other times.

### Attitudes toward Police

Means on Table 1 showed that when interviewers asked respondents whether law enforcement officers would rather catch them doing something wrong than try to help them, the average response (Mean = 2.32) fell between "Disagree" (2) and "Neutral" (3) on the response scale. When interviewers asked respondents how good a job was being done by your local law enforcement agency, their average response (Mean = 3.08) was just above "a good job" (3).

### Seriousness of Victimization

The average seriousness was .48 on the four-point scale described above. This mean response was midway between no incident (0) and a theft of less than \$150 or a burglary in which nothing was taken (1).

### Reporting the Incident to Police

The average response was .22. This average means that 22 percent of all households reported an incident to police.

### Structural Equation Model

We conducted a multivariate analysis of attitudes toward police using a structural equation model (SEM). This technique is unsurpassed in the ability to capture relations among variables in a single model. Excellent introductions to Structural Equation Modeling appear in Bentler (1995) and in Ullman (1996).

Structural Equation Modeling [SEM] goes a step beyond factor analysis because not only does it create factors from items, but also it allows for the examination of relations among factors. In SEM, factors are called *latent variables*. SEM has two main advantages over other statistical techniques. First, in contrast to *ad hoc*, additive scales, latent variables are better able to represent the subtleties of higher-level, more abstract, constructs such as fear of victimization and attitudes toward police.

Second, latent variables are error-free constructs. These constructs, such as Fear of Being Hurt or Attitudes Toward Police, represent the shared variance among a set of measured variables (items). By using latent

variables, relationships among them can be assessed without the usual "noise" of measurement error that is present in additive scales.

Figure 1 summarizes results of how well the factors capture the interrelations among the measured variables (items). Two latent variables (factors) are shown by ovals—Fear of Being Hurt and Positive Attitudes toward Police. Measured variables are shown by rectangles.

Four arrows point away from the latent variable, Fear of Being Hurt. The coefficients next to these arrows show the maximum likelihood factor loadings of the four items on this latent variable. All of the coefficients are above .58. They show that the latent variable of Fear of Being Hurt subsumes the items very well.

Two arrows point away from the latent variable, Positive Attitudes toward Police. They show the maximum likelihood factor loadings of two items on this latent variable. The coefficients showing the loadings are .50 and .79, indicating that the latent variable of Positive Attitudes toward Police subsumes the items very well.

Beginning on the left top of the model, the reader can see that the more Serious the Victimization, the greater the Reporting of the Incident to police, and this relation is strong (regression coefficient = .57). The more Serious the Victimization the greater the Fear of Being Hurt (.24). Women are more fearful of being hurt than men are (.16), and women hold more Positive Attitudes toward Police (.23) than men do. Older respondents (.19) and white respondents (.13) hold more Positive Attitudes toward Police than younger respondents and non-whites. Curved, double-headed arrows show correlation coefficients that are not presumed to be causal. One of these coefficients shows that the households of older respondents experienced less serious victimization (-.14). The other coefficient shows that respondents who are white also are older (.11). All relations shown in the model in Figure 1 are statistically significant beyond the .001 level.

One of the main advantages of structural equation models is that indices of overall fit of the model to the data are available. These indices compare the covariances among all the variables (saturated model) with covariances captured by the relations shown by the arrows in the model shown on Figure 1

(restricted model). One of the most useful fit indices is the Comparative Fit Index (CFI; Bentler 1990). A value of .90 on a fit index is considered to show a well-fitting model. The obtained CFI of .97 for the model on Figure 1 shows that the model fits the data very well.

## DISCUSSION

The model showed that the Seriousness of Victimization was the only variable that affected whether or not the incident was reported to police. This relation is well known (Hart & Rennison 2003).

Age of the respondent was the only variable in the model that affected the Seriousness of Victimization. Because the relation between age and Fear of Being Hurt was mediated by Seriousness of Victimization (and was not a direct relation), our findings support Ferraro's position (1995) that older persons do not have greater fear of crime than persons in other age groups.

Results showed that Positive Attitudes toward Police were a result of several small-to-moderate direct effects of demographic variables. Women, older persons, and whites held more positive attitudes toward police than men, younger persons and non-whites. These findings also supported those of previous research (Ackerman, Anderson, Jensen, Ludwig, Montero, Plante & Yanez 2001; Dull & Wint 1997; Huang & Vaughn 1996; Parker 1995; Smith et al 1999).

Fear of Being Hurt was a mediating variable in the model. We did not observe a direct, negative effect between Seriousness of Victimization and Positive Attitudes toward Police. Rather, Fear of Being Hurt mediated this relation. The more Serious the Victimization, the greater the Fear of Being Hurt, and the greater the Fear of Being Hurt, the less positive were Attitudes Toward Police. These findings are new. They imply that police can improve citizen evaluations by lowering the crime rate and by reassuring victims (Homant, Kennedy & Fleming 1984; Maguire 1991).

Neither our findings, nor those of Ferraro, support the notion of *perceptual criminology* in which fear of crime is independent of the actual risks (Ferraro 1995 3). Along with Ferraro, we found a moderate relation between Seriousness of Victimization and Fear of Being Hurt. Therefore, police should focus on decreasing the seriousness and rate of crime. Because of this process, citizens

will accurately perceive the risks, and they can act to lower the risks. Lower perception of risks is expected lower the rate of victimization and fear of victimization.

A second mediated effect was observed. Women were more afraid of being hurt than men were. This finding supported those of Ferraro. It suggests that police should work toward a high level of public safety, and they should define the situation as safe. They should reassure victims in both words and actions. The finding also suggests that police should continue to take seriously crimes of domestic violence and sexual assault, since women tend to fear that any crime can become a sexual crime. This *Symbolic Reassurance* (Henig & Maxfield 1978) by police should be especially effective for women. We expect these measures will decrease victim fear and improve attitudes toward police (Maguire 1991).

Community policing represents an attempt by police to create relations with citizens that are more personal. These personal relations can do much to counteract sensational media accounts that raise fear of crime. A study by Whitman and Loftus (1996 30) reported that although 83 percent of Americans thought crime was a big problem, only 17 percent thought it was a big problem in their community. Their findings also showed that 76 percent of respondents said they had learned about the issue from television or the newspaper. Only 22 percent of the respondents based their belief about the seriousness of crime on personal experience (Whitman & Loftus 1996 32).

Our analyses suggest that police should continue to address serious crimes as well as to solve problems as defined by citizens. In this way, crime will decrease, and so will risk of victimization. Citizens will feel safe, they will work well with police, and they will evaluate police highly.

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